

Interview

with

DIANE ENGLISH

May 19, 2006

By Sarah Thuesen

Transcribed by Karen Meier

The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Transcript on deposit at  
The Southern Historical Collection  
Louis Round Wilson Library

Citation of this interview should be as follows:  
"Southern Oral History Program,  
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,  
Wilson Library,  
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 2007 The University of North Carolina

## TRANSCRIPT--DIANE ENGLISH

Interviewee: Diane English  
Interviewer: Sarah Thuesen  
Interview Date: May 19, 2006  
Location: Charlotte, NC  
Length: 1CD; approximately 1 hour, 40 minutes

### START OF CD

ST: Alright. My name is Sarah Thuesen and today I am interviewing Diane English at her home in Charlotte, North Carolina in the Belmont neighborhood in Charlotte. Today is the nineteenth of May--It is the nineteenth, right?

DE: Yeah.

ST: 2006. I am conducting this interview for the Southern Oral History Program, the Long Civil Rights Project of the SOHP.

Diane, I thought we would first just start off by talking a little about your childhood and growing up around here. Where were you born?

DE: I was born in Union County, North Carolina very far in the woods as you might say. It was country, all country. We walked about a mile for the school bus. We had to walk a half a day to the store, to get to a store. I loved it because I played a lot. I was a tomboy. Woods and everywhere. I loved it. It was country, deep, deep country.

ST: What did your parents do there?

DE: My parents were sharecroppers. We lived on farms and they cared for the farms, grew food, took care of the farm. We were farmers mainly. We farmed acres and acres of food.

ST: What were the main things you grew?

DE: Cabbage, okra, you name it, we grew it. Potatoes, watermelons, peaches. It was just a variety of everything. The only thing I can remember buying at a store when I was growing up was a two pound bag of sugar. We got that once a month. That was it. We never bought candy. We always ate the licorice. We made that from sugar cane. We never got candy. We never had toothaches because we didn't get candy. We got candy on Christmas Day and that was your orange slices with the sugar on it. That was it, nothing else. We didn't know. We got plenty of fruit. They would buy the fruit from another farmer. They would sell the vegetables on Saturdays. They would go to the farmer's market as they call it now and sell the vegetables that we were supposed to have to make a living.

ST: Did you have to help out in the fields?

DE: I helped out in the fields. We also picked cotton. We had to pick cotton. I used to pick cotton sometimes. I mainly had to baby sit at that time because I had a younger brother and a younger sister. I liked to baby sit better. It was cooler and less worriation, the flies and the heat. It used to be scorching hot.

ST: What year did your family move to Charlotte?

DE: We moved to Charlotte in 1963 or '64, I believe. '63 or '64.

ST: What was Charlotte like when you first moved here? What are your memories of it?

DE: It was segregated. You had your white bathrooms, your black bathrooms. Was it black or Negro bathrooms? It was just segregated. Everything was detached up. Everybody was separate. The school that I attended which was Second Ward was all black. We never went to any other schools. That's our junior high schools.

ST: Had you been less aware of racial segregation in Union County?

DE: Yes, because we never--. It was only the one to two class school. It wasn't like you had a bunch of racial people running around. We never went into town because it was only one street. We had everything at home. We didn't have a TV at that time so we didn't see anything. We had a radio. We really didn't know about it. We could read about it and hear about it but it never affected us personally until we moved to Charlotte.

ST: You were maybe almost ten years old when you moved here?

DE: Uh-huh.

ST: You started in Second Ward School?

DE: I started at Billingsville. That's over in Grier Heights. We moved to Grier Heights our first--. We moved to Charlotte. We moved to Grier Heights. So I went to elementary school at Grier Heights.

ST: What was the Grier Heights neighborhood like at that time?

DE: About like Belmont now. Very rough but it was predominantly a black neighborhood. Low income. Targeted. A lot of your same things you have here in Belmont now. This is what it was at that time.

ST: Why did your parents move here? What brought them to Charlotte?

DE: I think because of us. We had gotten older. My parents, they never finished high school. They only got to the second grade of high school or elementary school. They

had a lot of--. They wanted the children to have a better life than what they had. They used to tell us they didn't want to have to see us be sharecroppers and do this. They wanted to see something else out of life for us. They moved here. My mother still worked in one of the--. She'd go away on Sunday afternoons and stay at some lady's house until the following Friday. We were basically about the same when we moved to the city as we were in the country. She would go back and clean up somebody's house or whatever. She didn't want that for us and our father didn't want that for us. We moved to the city.

ST: She worked as a domestic in both Union County and in Charlotte?

DE: She did it in both, all of her life. She couldn't even draw on disability or--. They never took out Social Security on her. She never worked. They didn't take it out on her.

ST: I guess you didn't see a lot of your mom during the week then?

DE: Only on Fridays. She would come home on Friday and then she would leave on Sundays. My father and my sisters and brothers, they raised us, the younger children.

ST: What did your dad do in Charlotte?

DE: He went to work in a construction company. Crowders, I believe it was Crowder Construction Company. He worked there for years driving a truck. I don't know what else, probably building something. He mainly drove the truck.

ST: You attended high school at Second Ward, right?

DE: Junior high. By the time I got ready to go into the high school they closed it.

ST: It closed in '69.

DE: '68.

ST: '68. Do you remember how students felt at the time Second Ward closed?

DE: Yes because it was right--. Let's see. Kennedy was murdered, was assassinated a couple of weeks before they talked about closing Second Ward. It was real rowdy that day. It was real rowdy. The kids, the students was rowdy. Everybody wanted to fight. It was the biggest arguments. They was on the teachers. Everybody was just totally out of it. It was storming that day. I remember it because it was bad storm came up that particular day. When we came home Kennedy died. He passed. It was awful the next day at school. Everybody was fighting. It was just a terrible, terrible sight.

ST: Most of the students were opposed to the school closing or--?

DE: The school closing plus, I think dealing with having to be put into--we were being shipped to integrate schools then. We were going to be integrated into the other schools then. Nobody really had knew what to expect. All we knew was what our parents had shown us and what we had seen going through downtown. You'd see you couldn't do this. You can't do this. You couldn't eat here. I think a lot of the students were just frustrated. We couldn't find jobs. It was like, oh well you couldn't get a job unless you're an old person and want to work in somebody's house. We had to actually do whatever.

ST: Did you end up attending an integrated high school or did you--?

DE: Yes, I did. Junior high I left--. When I left Grier Heights I went to Randolph Junior High. Then I went from Randolph, because of the age limits and your grades, I left Randolph and I think I went to--I can't remember what the next school was, but I know I went to Randolph. After I left Second Ward I would have been going into the ninth grade or eighth grade. I had to go to Randolph. They sent me to East Meck for the ninth grade but I went there for one day and I didn't like it because it was like the blacks here, the whites there. It wasn't what I wanted to be in. It was like the junior high kids had a hall. Your high

school kids had a hall. It was just a whole bunch of blah. Everybody was pushing and shoving the younger people around in the high school. I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. They took me from there and I went to Randolph for junior high, just junior high kids.

ST: What year did you finish school?

DE: '69. The latter part of '69 because I dropped out. I dropped out of school in the ninth grade for the same reason from school to school and frustration. My parents, my mother got sick. She couldn't work anymore. She had cataracts. Basically, I had a sister and a brother and we had to have money. She couldn't draw Social Security. She couldn't get welfare. Basically, we ended up with nothing. I got a job at seventeen.

ST: What was your first job?

DE: I worked at S&W Cafeteria at the old Charlottetown Mall. It paid the less money I ever worked for. It was a start. My father--It was my mother too shortly after that--left us with basically nothing, had everything turned off, lights, water, rent, everything. I became a full grown adult at seventeen with everything. I had to put it all in my name. My mother couldn't do it because she didn't have an income. Then she was half--she was blind which we didn't know at that time that she was totally blind. She never went outside. She stayed in the house.

ST: It's during this same time, the late '60s, early '70s that there's obviously a lot of social upheaval in the South. I wanted to just go back a little bit and ask you, do you have memories of the Civil Rights Movement in Charlotte?

DE: I have some of King in Atlanta because--and Monroe. We lived in one of the houses that he had lived in when we were in the midst of a move where we--one farm. We lost that farm. We were in the midst of a move. We were moved into this particular house



temporarily. They said it was--everything in there had pictures and writings and books of King, Martin Luther King.

ST: This was in Atlanta, you say?

DE: No, this was in Monroe, Union County. This was deep down in Union County, right outside of Waxsaw, Monroe in that area. I never knew about him living there but the house had everything, the pictures, the books, the whole nine yards. We read for the whole time we was there. It was great. I loved it. It was a beautiful house.

ST: Who owned the house? Do you know?

DE: No, because it was some landlord that were trying to--. He was trying to get us to another farm. In the meantime we had to be settled, have somewhere to stay. We just went there. That's all I remember. We just went there. We stayed there for about a month. It was great. I love it because I got to read. They had pianos. It was just real nice.

ST: I'll have to find out more about the history of that place. So, you knew about King. What about the local scene in Charlotte, did you observe any protests?

DE: I remember reading and seeing the protest at Kress. Kress is downtown. I remember going there a lot of times and having to wait at the back, go to the back to get the food, whatever. My mother used to work at Kress during that time when they had the protests. She used to bring us food from there to the back door. That was the back door entrance for all blacks. I remember things like that. As far as big protests, no.

ST: How do you think the Civil Rights Movement changes Charlotte?

DE: It changed it drastically. At that particular time, you didn't really feel comfortable walking anywhere on your own or just--. There was no enjoyment. The city was like--everybody was looking down on the blacks at that particular time. It just felt that



way whether they did it or not. It felt like—it made you feel real small because you go somewhere and you see Negro bathroom, white bathroom. We're all in the same wash room. I'm like what's the difference in the bathrooms, really. If we can stand here side by side and wash our hands why can't we utilize the same bath--which I used to do. It anyway just--for spite. I would crawl up under the--. If the black bathroom was filled I just crawled up under and used the bathroom. [laughter]

ST: You had integrated the bathrooms a while back?

DE: Oh, yes. I had to. It was a dime. I remember paying a dime to use the bathroom uptown in the old Belk's building.

ST: Oh, really.

DE: Yeah, you had to pay a dime to use the bathroom, like a dime? I don't have a dime. I'd just go right on and use it. It used to be real funny because we had a lot of relatives that used to work at Belk's at that time in the cafeteria part. We used to go up there and they would have us saying don't go in that bathroom over there. As soon as we got a chance we would go in the bathroom. The bus station, the greyhound bus station used to have the same thing. We used to go in there and play around and go in the bathroom just to be seeing what was in there. It was the same old dirty bathroom. It was no big different. We could never figure out why it was such a big issue to have separate bathrooms. What's the problem? They all used in the same way. What can I say? I remember the busses. I never got on a bus because my parents wouldn't let me ride the bus. We walked and we had a car.

ST: Did they not want you riding the bus because of segregation?

DE: We didn't have to ride the bus because we didn't have anywhere to go. If we went they would take us. It wasn't needful for us to ride the bus. I was scared of the busses

really because it was so raggedy and big. We very seldom got to see the busses unless you were downtown. They only went to certain areas. They only ran it certain times.

ST: Did they run out to where you were living at the time?

DE: They used to run straight down Monroe Road. We lived in Grier Heights. We would have to walk from the neighborhood to Monroe Road. Nobody did that at night. That was a no-no walking in Griertown at night. It was just awful. We didn't have that good of street lights. It wasn't too trustworthy with the people that lived in the neighborhood. About like Belmont now. You have different variety of people all over the place. It wasn't too safe to be walking around at night, especially riding the bus.

ST: By the late '60s, early '70s a lot of the segregation you were describing from earlier times was gone.

DE: It was mostly gone.

ST: Mostly gone.

DE: It was still around.

ST: Where did you still see it?

DE: You could see it when you applied for jobs. It was still there. You didn't get your good paying jobs. When you went to school you didn't get the better books. You got all of the old raggedy books. It was obvious that it was something wrong but not as much so as you see what went on in Alabama and Mississippi. It wasn't to that state. It should've been but it didn't get that far. I think we had some riots here back in the '70s or protests and whatever. I never attended them.

ST: You've mentioned jobs. What other types of work was left to be done in the early '70s in terms of Civil Rights that you saw? Was it mainly economics, jobs?

DE: The only jobs I knew of were--. My mother, they did housework, housekeepers and babysitters. We baby-sit. That was basically it. And a cafeteria job working in the restaurants or maybe driving a truck or something. You would be out on a construction site. Other than that, that was basically all I ever saw.

ST: Just limited choices for--.

DE: Very limited choices.

ST: Speaking of the choices you had, how long did you work at the S&W Cafeteria?

DE: Probably about a year or two.

ST: Then what did you do after that?

DE: I went to school and went to--. I went to school at night to get my diploma. I had to get that because my mother wouldn't rest until I got that. I went to Presbyterian Hospital and went through their nursing assistant's program. Then I stayed there--I had to work for them for a year because I had to work night shift. I had to leave my mother home by herself. I decided I couldn't work nights. It was the only thing for the next three to four years was second shift or third shift. I went to Orthopedic Hospital. I worked in the Outpatient Emergency room for eight years. Back then it was Charlotte Orthopedic Hospital.

ST: What is it today?

DE: I think its Orthopedic something. They've remodeled and redone everything over there now. I worked there for eight years. I was an OR Tech. I worked in the Emergency Room, the operating, taking patients, prepping them for OR. Then I went up to the nurses' station as a nursing secretary until one of the head nurse's daughters got out of summer school and needed--got out of school--and needed a job for the summer. She asked

me to go back to eleven to seven on the floor and take a dollar cut in pay. I refused. I was only making \$3.72, give me a break. You telling me to give--. I had about eight weeks of vacation. I took up all my vacation and I never went back. That was the end of my career with Orthopedic Hospital.

ST: Is that when you started working for the City Transit then?

DE: Nope. I went to school, went back to school. I went to CPCC, took up some trainings, job training. I started into the nursing program. Then I decided I didn't want the nursing program. Then I went into business administration. I liked it. Oh, I loved business administration. Then I never could settle on one specific field so I just went and took different classes just to see what it was like. That's what I did for a couple of years. I went through certain programs like the Urban League. They would pay you to take up a training. At this time they had neighborhood youth services.

ST: The Urban League sponsored that?

DE: No. It was just called a neighborhood youth services. It was for young adults under the age of twenty that didn't have much job experiences. They would train you on the job and pay you a salary while you go to school. I took up a lot of training with them also.

ST: Any particular job experiences during those years that stand out for you?

DE: The only one that stood out was working for Duke Power at the Catawba Nuclear plant in construction. I loved it. I loved the construction world. I got my credentials for a powerhouse mechanic which is only a pipe fitter. An under licensed plumber is what it's called. You can fit pipes. You can do your own plumbing.

ST: Were you one of the few women doing that or--?

DE: It was 500 women out of 5,000 employees on the day shift. So, yeah I was just one out of five hundred. We loved every bit of it. We all worked the same shift. It was something because it was something new to do everyday and something to learn. Something different and you made money. I couldn't believe it. By this time it was 1980. To find a job that say they pay you thirteen dollars an hour that a female could land. I thought I was the thing at that time. Nobody could have told me nothing different. It was in York, South Carolina. I used to have to commute to York, South Carolina everyday.

ST: Oh, that's quite a drive, huh?

DE: By this time I had had my daughter, my oldest daughter.

ST: So you were working full time, commuting a long distance and raising--you have two daughters right?

DE: I had the other one shortly thereafter, about four years later. They are four years apart.

ST: What made it possible for you to juggle all that?

DE: I had to juggle it. It was either or. My mother was still living at that time. She wasn't getting any income. I had to work. Somebody had to work. We had to have somewhere to stay. It was just something I wanted to do. I wanted to do better. I wanted something better for me and my family and my kids and my sisters and brothers. It was just seeing something better. Each day I could see something a little bit better that we could've had or should have had. It was like I had a thing about I can do better. I just wanted to keep doing better and better and better until I got to CATS [Charlotte Area Transit System]. I've been stuck there for eighteen years.

ST: How did you make the transition--? Did you go directly from Duke Power work to--?

DE: Nope. I went to Charlotte-Meck schools as a school bus driver. Then I worked in the cafeteria during the day and drove the bus in the afternoons. I decided I didn't want to do that anymore because the kids were like barbaric, coming from another planet, especially your junior high kids. Those are the ones that have the most problems. Your high school and elementary kids are sweet. Junior high is that detrimental part of their life. It's like everybody's got to fight, fight, fight. I left and I went back to CP again. I went back to CPC again. I lived off of my pensions and my stocks and bonds that I had purchased during that time that I worked at Duke Power for three years. I just went back to school, took up more classes, engineering. Basically, I just took up classes to see what I could do to actually make more money. That happened. I stayed there for about a year and went to school on Saturdays. I worked during the day doing nurse's aide work, going and sit with people, working at the different nursing homes through a private duty setting service where you'd go and they'd give you a job to go sit with people.

ST: What year did you start working for--and just to clarify when you refer to CATS that's Charlotte--?

DE: Charlotte Area Transit System.

ST: --Area Transit System. What year did you start working for them?

DE: I believe it was '88.

ST: Okay.

DE: That was a big drop in the bucket with salary too.

ST: Oh really?

DE: I loved Duke Power. I went to--what was it? The school system was paying about \$6.50 and then you had to work your way up. I think I had gotten up to \$7.35. CATS kept calling--well, Charlotte Area Transit kept calling me. I kept telling them if they could give me \$7.35 I would come. They kept saying no, we can't give you \$7.35. I wouldn't come until they actually called and said we can give you \$7.35 and that was in '88.

ST: That was still a lot less than you had been making at Duke Power?

DE: It was a whole lot less. It was a drop in the bucket really. It was to the point--Duke Power has a point system also just like Charlotte Area Transit. We have a point system. You get points for not being on time. You don't get to work. You get points if you out sick, if your family's sick, it doesn't matter. You're still going to get a point. It was really better for me because I didn't have to commute twenty-five miles a day. Then I could be, if one of my children got sick I could actually take them to the doctor instead of having to take points and be threatened to be fired if you get X amount of points. I think Duke Power had eight points at that time. It was like rain, sleet, or snow you worked. At that time we were working six days a week. It was Monday through Saturday. It was a must that you showed up Monday through Saturdays.

ST: That must've been really tough.

DE: They fed you on dinner Saturdays, duh. After they keep you at work all day of course feed me. It was six days a week. It was a big drop in salary but it was worth the change for me.

ST: You could spend more time with your children.

DE: I didn't have to worry about--I had this raggedy old car. It used to break down, be broke down on the side of the street. It was awful. Then we had fifteen feet of





snow in '88 and I had to go to work from Charlotte to all the way to York, South Carolina and that was murder. There was nobody on the roads but me trying to go to work. We had to go to work. On our days we had to go to work. They didn't even give us that day off.

ST: They don't plow the snow very well around.

DE: Especially on your back roads. They don't touch the back roads. York, South Carolina has a lot of back roads.

ST: During all these years of working were you ever involved in any workplace activism?

DE: Other than Urban Leagues and the youth services. I used to talk, my counselor and I, we used to talk a lot. She was into the activism. She used to talk to me about what actually was going on, blah, blah, blah. It didn't really faze me at that time. I was too busy trying to make money to be interested in activating, be out with the crowd talking about this. It was to work, to bed. That was it. That's it for a couple of years anyway.

ST: Do you remember what your co-worker used to talk about in terms of what was going on during those years?

DE: How they wish they could have a better job. Everybody wanted another job. Everybody wanted to leave and go up north. I'm like what's up there, duh. I did have a lot of friend that moved up to New York and Washington, DC. They say for more money, more pay, better pay.

ST: Did you ever consider doing that?

DE: I did. I went to DC and stayed for eight years.

ST: Oh. When was that during--?

DE: This was between the '70s and the '80s. My parents, my mother, we all relocated to DC. We stayed. I used to come home. I was younger then. This was before because I used to come home to pick up my sister, my baby sister and brother and take them by bus. This would go on during the summer. I would come back and forth and take them home and then come back and forth on the bus until we got lost one time. Then we didn't get to get bus anymore. We got left off the bus. We were out trying to get something to eat. The bus left us. We got stranded.

ST: Where were you?

DE: Danville, Virginia.

ST: Oh no.

DE: I never will forget that raggedy place, Danville. That's where it was really you could see all this prejudice stuff in the bus station. It was awful. Danville, Virginia. It scared me.

ST: Pretty scary.

DE: Yeah, it was. It was just me and my brother and sister. It was awful. We found ourselves running around and hiding in the bathrooms and stuff to keep from being around people. They were real--some violent people back then, real violent people.

ST: Did you find that in DC it was easier to make a living?

DE: No, it wasn't easier. I think the lifestyle was better.

ST: How so?

DE: The atmosphere. People were more at ease with what their lives was about. That's were I really came in contact with some of the actual--. They set everything on fire. They were rioting really bad up there. They burned down a whole street. I mean a whole

street went up in flames. Our street that we were living on. They burned; I think it was Fourteenth Street in Washington, DC. This was in the '60s I believe. '69, '70s. No, it was after. It had to be around in the '80s. I can't remember. We had went back for a summer to pick up--. My parents was moving back down here. I had went up to get the smaller kids to bring on the bus so that they could bring their furniture. While I was here, that was when they burnt down the whole street. Everything went up in flames. By the time we got back here it was just smoke. The whole thing was just smoldering. I think they had a huge riot that went on in Washington in that particular year. I can't remember the year. It was huge. Everything was basically burning. Washington, DC was on fire is what they used to say.

ST: What did you think about that at that time?

DE: It was real scary because they were throwing smoke bombs everywhere. You really couldn't--. The streets lights were shot out or put out. It wasn't safe at all.

ST: Did you have a sense of why? Was it mainly young people who were rioting?

DE: It was everybody. It was everybody. You really couldn't tell because the kids was doing it. The parents was doing it. Anybody. It was just like you'd be walking along and all of a sudden somebody would come along with this bottle with a piece of something in it and just light it and throw it through a window and everything just goes up in flames. It was just like it was an ordinary thing. The police up there, I felt real sorry for them. I know they were tired. It was so many people. They couldn't keep up with everybody. It wasn't enough of them or the people who live there.

ST: Was the violence up there part of the reason you moved back to Charlotte?

DE: Yeah, my parents during that time, they had been living up there off and on. During that time, they said it was best that we came home. It wasn't safe. Our whole street

was burning. My aunt lived up there thirty some years. We lived in northeast. That's where your violence went down was in northwest, the northeast. My aunts lived in northwest, north south. It wasn't that bad in those areas. I used to live not far from the White House. We could walk to the White House, to the Zoo, the big zoo, all of it on Columbia Circle, right near the White House. In fact, we could stand out on the street and look down on the White House. It was real pretty. It just wasn't safe. It wasn't safe at all.

ST: Even though the violence scared you were you sympathetic with why folks were rioting? Did you understand why they were frustrated?

DE: Yes, I did understand that part because it was time for us to have a change. We shouldn't have to work in somebody's house. You shouldn't have to get the lowest education because you are black. We should have equal rights. We were born. We all got blood. We all think alike. We all got brains. That's what I could say. We all got brains but why is one smarter than the other. I could never figure it out. I worked real hard in school for that purpose and became an A student. My friends over here, they were all white. I was the only black. They would have to sit with me because I was an A student. They would sit us in the front of the class like show us off or whatever. They didn't want to show me off because I was black.

ST: You felt like they resented your presence?

DE: They resented it but there was nothing they could do because I was an A student. It was like why is she here. She's an A student. I did have some real nice teachers that believed in some of the things we believed in. We should be treated equally. I think that was the best that could've happened to me in school.

ST: Were these white teachers or--?

DE: They were white teachers, yep they were white teachers.

ST: You felt like the violence in DC was partly a reflection of frustration much like you had experienced yourself?

DE: It was worse that what I had experienced as a child. I had never experienced it that close until in DC. We were so far out in the woods it was not like we had neighbors. Our neighbors were miles away. The only time we really saw anybody was when we went into town. That was to sell vegetables and we very seldom got to go into town unless it was like a special occasion. We never got to leave the farm. Everything we had been on the farm. We loved the woods. We did fishing. We did it all. Horseback riding, sticks. It wasn't real horses. We had sticks that we rode horses on. We had a horse but it was for my brother to deliver newspapers with. We used to ride the hogs and the cows and stuff like that. Those are the things we called horses at that time. It was fun. It was a lot of fun. I really missed it when I moved to the city, the outside, the quietness, just the space and the air is different. It was a big difference when we moved to the city.

ST: Up until the early '90s you had never lived in the Belmont neighborhood, right? Is that true?

DE: I used to come over here when I used to go out. But, no, I never lived in the Belmont neighborhood.

ST: When you were a young kid in Charlotte do you have any memories of Belmont?

DE: Yeah, It was rough. It was real bad. Me and my girlfriend used to go out and we used to come through here. You could hear the gun fire and people fighting. Oh god, we would always have to run. Now, we hung out in Villa Heights. We hung out in Villa

Heights at that time. It was just as bad but it just seemed like it was worse. This used to be called North Charlotte. It's still North Charlotte. I don't know why they call us Belmont. It was North Charlotte then and it's still North Charlotte. Now you have old North Charlotte which is still North Charlotte. They broke it down into these specific neighborhoods after you got your people with money and your developers and the city, all this. It's still North Charlotte.

ST: So you and your friends didn't really call this area Belmont?

DE: It wasn't Belmont. It was called North Charlotte. Nobody ever knew. My sisters lived in Villa Heights for these some odd years and she never knew of anything called Villa Heights. She knew of the school Villa Heights Elementary School but nobody told her her neighborhood was Villa Heights. It was like they saying Villa Heights, Belmont. I'm like, "Where are these places located?" We never heard. It was all North Charlotte. It wasn't Villa Heights, Belmont. It was just North Charlotte.

ST: That's interesting. It sounds like these names were attached to the place later.

DE: They may have been there but nobody distinguished them. We just called it North Charlotte, no names on them.

ST: You say the neighborhood was violent by the mid to late '60s. Was it predominantly African-American or--?

DE: It was white.

ST: It was still white.

DE: It was all white up until--I think the lady said she moved here in the '60s, late '60s something like that. She said she was the first black couple. The lady that lived here was the second one I believe. I think she's the third black person.



ST: The one who you think was the first, what's her name?

DE: Blanch Perry. B-L-A-N-C-H. Perry. P-E-R-R-Y. This lady here, her name is Diane Adams. She has been over here for a lifetime. This lady here, I don't know her real name. All we call her is Ms. Celeste. She's a elderly lady. I don't even know her last name. I've been over here. We talked. I just never asked her, her last name. She's real quiet. She sweeps the street everyday. Her side of the street over there, at six o'clock in the morning she just sweeping.

ST: She keeps her place pretty clean then, huh?

DE: Yeah, the outside anyway. I think she's more nosier. She keeps up with what's going on in the neighborhood. She's real nosy. She'll come outside and look and just walk up to it to see what's going on. She sits on her porch a lot.

ST: It was right in this block, it sounds like, were the first African-American homes in this neighborhood.

DE: Yeah, there were.

ST: Have you heard any of your neighbors tell stories about what it was like when they first moved here?

DE: The lady that lived here, she said it was all white. They had no problems, no issues because everybody stayed to themselves. She only had one child. Her child didn't live here at that time. It was no bunch or kids or a bunch of commotion, none of that. She said it was nice. It was called Sunnyside I believe. Kennon Street used to be called Sunnyside. That's what it says on my deed. It's called Sunnyside.

ST: What made you decide to move to Belmont in '93? I should back up and say where were you living before that?

DE: I lived over in Honduras off of Sugar Creek. Honduras Apartments. I was living over there. I knew the lady here because my daughter had a son by her son. Her son used to get in a lot of trouble. One particular night she called, the lady called and she had a lot of homes in this area. She had bought up--her father had purchased, I think they had several homes in the neighborhood at that time. During the time that the city came through and they coded her homes really bad. They took a few of them I believe. She only had two left when I came into the picture in 1993. That was this one and she had another one up on Parson Street. At that time, she had to either fix it or the city was going to demolish it, this particular home and the one up on Parson. This home was paid for. It was vacant. The drug dealers used to hang out here. Then she had this lady that was homeless that had asked her to live here because she didn't have anywhere to stay. She told the lady the house hadn't been remodeled. The house wasn't safe for a family. This particular lady had kids. The lady agreed to pay her 250 a month just to live here temporarily. She let her move in but she never paid her the 250. She paid her whenever she could. That went on for years, I think. Then in '93 is when the city came out and started coding, code enforcement. The lady that was staying here temporarily, after the city coded it, she had to move. She didn't want to move. She went down and filed papers against Blanch Perry as a bad landlord or whatever. She took her to court. Then the city, well you got ninety days to either fix your house or we're going to demolish it. During this time is when she had a bad illness. She was real bad off sick. I told her if I could help her let me know. She called and said, "Can you help me? They are going to take my house." That's when I really became deeply involved with this particular neighborhood because I found-- I really went through the phone books and called people that I knew to ask them questions about what could be done to save the lady's house.

They told me get your code enforcement sheets. Tell them to get you a copy of all of your code violations. That's when I went, me and my girlfriends, then we got an attorney. I can't remember. It was a legal aid person. We didn't go to see him. We just spoke to him by phone. They said well you can look at your paper work. You can actually tell whether or not it's a real problem. He said, "Do you see anything like a dirty wall or a dirty floor?" I'm like yeah. They got dirty wall. They got dirty floor. They got dirty this. He said, "Well, all you do is go in there and either wash it or either paint it. That will take it out of code." I learned a lot from my friends and an attorney friend that we were talking to by phone. We didn't have money to pay him for services.

ST: Was that Ted Fillette by any chance?

DE: Yeah. Mr. Fillette's been around for a while. We got the list. We had to go out--. We had to get a mortgage on the house because we didn't have enough funds to fix the house. This particular family that was living her, she would not move. She stayed here. She took the lady to court, back and forth to court. The judge kept telling her no, no. She don't have to move. Then that's when she decided well, maybe if--. You know, she couldn't handle it anymore. She said well let me just give you the house, then see what you can do with it to save it. That's when I told her, "Fine with me." I have no problem with putting this broad out. I used to send the Sheriff over in the middle of the night to have her all, her and her family put out in the middle of the night. Then we'd go to court and the judge would just be going on and on, "Make her your tenant." "No, I don't want her as a tenant. I want her out of the house so I can fix the house so I can live there." It took almost a year to get that woman out of the house through the legal process. The legal process is bad for homeowners. The people that own your property, a tenant can make it rough for you. They

can actually take your property away from you by the laws. The judge won't put them out, "Oh, let them stay there and let them pay you \$175 a week." If you can't pay 250 a month how you going to pay me \$175 a week? Come on, that's enough. I said, "Naw." He really got frustrated with me each time we went to court. He would tell me let them live. I would say, "No, they can't live here." Finally, in the end--I think about seven or eight months--the city stepped in because the code enforcement. They were coming in and out and coding everything. The city actually relocated this lady. She was an old crack head, drug sellers, everything. Her kids used to sell drugs and stuff. It went on like that for six months. After I got her out, the house was basically a shell. It was demolished in the inside. It was water dripping everywhere. The ceiling was rotted out. There was no heat system in the house. There was no water, plumbing that actually worked in the house. It was roaches swimming in the kitchen sink, stuck on the walls with rats everywhere. It was terrible. It was horrible. Then it was just like why would these people stay in such filth and then I looked and I could understand why. This was all they knew. This was all they knew about. It was pitiful because they lady had a younger daughter and a younger son at that time and a boyfriend that she beat, and he beat her. It was just awful for the kids.

ST: Sounds like an awful situation.

DE: Yeah, it was. It was better when she got out. Then she went to--. She moved from here to Dundeen which was ever worse. Dundeen over there off of Beatties Ford Road.

ST: Is that a neighborhood?

DE: That's a street and a neighborhood over there off of Beatties Ford Road. She just--. This particular lady is just ghetto, is what I call them. She's just bang, bang, shoot them up, fight, fight, drink, drink. Those are the kind of people I call ghetto. They don't

know any other life other than just ghettoism is what I call it. They don't know how to survive with a--doing other things outside of beating and cursing and ranting and raving. They don't know any other way. I don't if it's how they was brought up or if this is just what you do when you live in a neighborhood like this. God, it was awful. When I got this house it was terrible.

ST: Did you have moments where you second guessed your decision to take this house?

DE: I still have moments that I feel like I could have had this if I hadn't of been here. I've put all my life savings, every dime of my money, every dime that I've had saved or would have had into this house. When this lady moved out the roof, I had to have a new roof. It was five roofs up on top of this house. The city made me take all that down. The walls had to be--. The walls had holes in them. Of course you had to fix that. Then they made--. Then what topped it off, what really got me, my back door sits--. They made me move my back door from one corner of my house to the other corner of my house.

ST: Why was that?

DE: They never said. They just said the door was in the wrong place. They made me move the whole back door. Then that means the wood that--it's a wood house. It's made out of wood, made out of redwood in fact. All of the houses in here is made out of wood. In fact, when the wood was taken off the guy couldn't put it back together. I had to go out and buy new wood to fix the wall to look like the other wall.

ST: How much of all this work did you do yourself?

DE: I ended up doing the majority of it. Me and my sisters and kids ended up doing the majority of it, what we could in the inside. Now, the roof we didn't touch. We

had somebody that made a mess, but anyway. We had that person. I had to get a plumber. During the time that this lady got out of this house, the house was vacant. The floors in here were like down hill, uphill. They had like run down, rotted out. They were just--. You would walk in here and it was like walking downhill. You walk over here it's like walking uphill, all the way through the house. All the floors had to be leveled. It was like the guy that was the contractor which was a city, working for the city at that time. He tore out--. He was doing the work and we gave him money. In fact, he got about \$26,000. Basically he didn't do anything. He would tell me that code person say, "Yes it passed." Then I would see another code person and they said, "No, I didn't say this." By this time, all the monies was gone. That guy got fired from the city. He was a contractor with the city. He got fired. That still left me holding the gun with work to be done. I just got in here, me and my sister. During that time I was at CATS. I would come home from work and work on the house, go back to my other house that I was living in. This was vacant and I lived over on Honduras. I would come over here on my days off and work all day to the middle of the night until finally it was just a shell. It didn't have any--. The heat was good because I had to have a heating system put in which was too small. It's sitting out on my front porch, on the side over here. I paid \$2500 for a unit that was too small. Code enforcement said it was too small. I had to end up going back to get another unit. This time the guy said let's just get central air while you at it. I said whatever. That's how I ended up with central air. I wouldn't have had central air either. It's just been one thing after another. I fix this, something else breaks down. It's just like the house is so old. It's settling. Every time it settles it's something going wrong, always something to fix. Then when I was remodeling it the old drunks or the drinkers in the neighborhood, they came over and they stole all of the copper piping. I didn't



know that they had taken the piping. Then it had aluminum siding on the outside of the house, they stripped all of the siding off the house one night. I came back and it was just like who put the holes in the house. There was just holes everywhere because the wood was decayed. I'm like who did this. Nobody knew anything but all of the siding was gone. I had to go out and get somebody to put siding on the house.

ST: That must've been incredibly frustrating.

DE: It was. The more I did, the more they stole while I was in the process. The guys that was helping me, they were stealing my tools at night. They would come over and steal the stuff from us at night, the wood, the saws, stuff like that. We'd buy. They'd steal them when we'd leave and stuff. It was awful. It was terrible.

ST: Was there a good bit of violence in the neighborhood at that time?

DE: They were shooting. It was nothing to see a bunch of drug dealers standing around selling drugs all day. During the times that I would be over here working it was awful. They would just be standing. This used to be, this house used to be a hot spot. In fact, the police raided my house.

ST: Really?

DE: In 1998. They tried to knock my door down but I have three-ply steel. We had to open the door. They still--. We opened the door but they raided my house. Because the drug dealers that live in this area happened to be one of my daughter's friends. My daughters know all of them because they all went to school. This particular guy comes to the house. He sits around. In fact, he has a baby by my daughter. He used to come by. The police was after him back and forth. The drug dealers used to live here, basically, before I moved into the house. I was in their territory. I would be in the house after I moved in here.



They would be outside the house. I didn't have to worry about nobody breaking in. They didn't destroy--. They would destroy your property by trashing it, but they wouldn't steal and they didn't break in. Basically, they were a good source for me at that time because it was a lot of other shooting, gun fire going on in the neighborhood and stuff.

ST: What do you mean they were a good source for you?

DE: They were, as far as making the transition from where I lived, peace and quiet, no noise at all, to an area where everybody walked the streets all night. It was nothing to hear gunfire. I could open this front door and the guys would be shooting at each other right here. I could hear the pellets hitting my fence out here. I could hear the pellets, the gun pellets hitting my fence. I couldn't stand in here, lay in here really, and these windows would be lit up with blue fire where they would just be shooting right outside. I didn't have this fence that I have now. I had to remodel because they walked that down. It was just flat. They were running up in the yard behind my--. I had a tree here and they would be shooting from behind my tree. It would be caught in my cars that would be parked out here. They would be dodging behind the car shooting at each other. It was nothing. The police, when they showed up it was all over. This went on not only in this--and this was one of your worst streets. Kennon Street was off the chain.

ST: How effective was the police in trying to rein in some of the violence?

DE: At first, I didn't have no faith in the police department. First of all when I did decided to move here, which I had to come in by myself because my daughters wouldn't come with me. They said they were too afraid to stay here. Basically, I was living here by myself. At that time I didn't have any faith in the police department or anybody really because to ride through the neighborhood and see the broke down houses, the people walking

the street, the drug dealers just standing out broad open daylight, shooting at each other, broad open daylight, stabbings, hair fight, you know fighting. This is basically five minutes from your downtown Charlotte and five minutes away from the police department. I could not believe. How is this possible that this neighborhood got like this with your police department within five minutes of it? I've always felt like it was a purpose for them to let this neighborhood go down like this for the simple reason, the same thing that they are doing now--revitalization and take over. That's all I could ever see. Every police officer here has to go through here or down Davidson Street to get to the office downtown, right. You telling me all this is going on and they didn't know. I don't think they like me very well either. I think that's one reason why they raided my house. I used to be inside and the drug dealers, they were alright people. They would come here and they would say, "Ms. English, I'm hungry." Duh. What do you want me to do? "If I go buy some food will you cook it for me?" Sure. Love to. It's going to cost you. I would charge them like twenty dollars just to cook them a sandwich. They'd say, "Well we'll give it to you." Oh, okay then. That's my gas money. Okay. During the same time I'm calling the police 24/7 a day. Finally they would say, "Well Ms. English we think you in with it because they still there. That's your property. You've got to get them off your property." I'm like, "Well if you can't do it, what makes you think I can do it?" It got so bad to where as they would come out here and they would jump the guys. They would brutal--. It would be something brutal where they would slam their heads on the sidewalk and bust they face and smash it in the rocks. It got awful.

ST: You saw police doing that to drug dealers?

DE: Yeah. Then I started taping them. I started taping them with the camcorder. That really got them mad. I started making complaints into the police department--What is It

called?--internal affairs. Then it really got nasty at that time. I was real vicious at that time. Then I would be in here because I would let my daughter drive my car and they would drop me off early. I always got off at one or two o'clock in the afternoon. Nobody would ever be out here in midday because it would be real, real hot in the summer. They would always come in the afternoon. I would always be inside the house already. It was like nothing moving except for me and the TV at a hush because I'm scared to death. I've got to listen for the gunfire. They would be out here. Then all of sudden these police officers would show up. They would be walking around messing with the guys, harassing the guys. They would be sitting actually up in my back yard up against my house or all the way around the house, wherever. Then one particular incident I found that the officers were actually sticking drugs into these guys' possessions.

ST: Did you see this happen?

DE: Yeah, I saw that happen. Then it's when I really had to speak out. You can't do that. If you're going to get them you have to do it legally. I felt like a lot of stuff they were doing was not doing it right. No, I can't help you if you not going to do it right. I guess the officers was frustrated because there were so many of them. To me, I was a newcomer and I was just looking in. I couldn't see it. You had people get robbed in my back yard, stripped naked. They get robbed in my back yard. The police department would get here but they would be later. They would always show up much later than what they need to. It made me feel like something is not right. Then all of sudden nobody showing up at any time. I had a guy that shot through my car out there one day, shooting at somebody else. I called and nobody showed up until like seven o'clock that night. They said it was a dispatch error. They didn't get the report. I'm like yeah right. You were hoping that I had been behind that

shot, right? I don't know. The officers that we have over here now are pretty good officers, but I still say the neighborhood should have never gotten--no neighborhood deserves to be like this one and Villa Heights and Optimist Park. No neighborhood, not especially with a large police force like we have here. No neighborhood this close to your downtown area should have ever gotten this bad. The city should have stepped in. The homes that are dilapidated or whatever, the city should've done something years ago. What's there purpose now? All of sudden they got all these relocation programs. They got this. They got that. The same thing they had years ago, right? Probably had more because it was cheaper then. Now all of sudden, the city and this Hope VI thing. Everybody's up on Hope VI la la la. Ain't nothing but a total rip off as far as I'm concerned. It's just a disaster.

ST: You're describing a lot of really frustrating things you experienced when you first moved here and scary things. Was there something that you liked about the neighborhood that convinced you, you wanted to stay here despite all the problems?

DE: The house. The house. This was the first house that I have ever owned with my name on it. I never owned a home. I lived in apartments. I had a home but it was out in Pine Valley, way out. At that time you didn't have bus transportation there. After I lost my car I had to move. I lived in Earle Village twice in my lifetime.

ST: Was that when you were pretty young?

DE: I was twenty-three, twenty-four. I moved into Earle Village from Grier Heights. I stayed there for a year. Then I got a job. That's when I was working at Duke Power. Then the rent went sky high over there. They gave me--a program name Upward Bound gave me the house out in Pine Valley. I stayed out there for three or four years. Then

my car wasn't any good to get back and forth. I was at Orthopedic Hospital at that time, couldn't get to work. I had to give that up. I moved back to Earle Village.

ST: What was Earle Village like at that time?

DE: Earle Village was basically one of your--I thought it was the biggest. I couldn't see nothing but Earle Village every time I opened my door. They say Piedmont Courts was the biggest. It was the oldest. It was basically like my neighborhood now. We had a lot people, kids everywhere. You never heard a lot of gunfire but you had a lot of fights. You know, neighbors fighting neighbors. Children fighting children, simply because nobody worked. Everybody was on welfare. Everybody sat at home all day. As far as some of the things that I have endured since I have been here--living in Earle Village was a piece of cake.

ST: Really.

DE: Based on from what I've had to live through here since I've been in this house.

ST: You felt safer at Earle Village than you do here?

DE: Yes, much safer in Earle Village. Even with it being the projects. I felt more comfortable. I felt like it was safer than it was when I first moved here. This was like a horror movie, to me it was like a horror. I had never been around a bunch of gunfire and the people. The people is what really scared me because everybody carried a gun. It's like who do you not know that don't have a gun. They would pull it out at any time and just go firing at somebody. It's like hey--. We actually stood here, me and my grandkids were out here one day playing basketball right here at our front gate. Where you parked at but on this end. This guy was coming down the side street--where you saw me at first--on the back of this

pick up truck. I don't know what happened but it was a couple that used to live in this house next door, the little grey house next door. I don't know what happened but when this guy came down on the back of the truck and got right in front of us his guy opened fire and just shot him up on the back of the truck. Me and all my grandkids was right here. It was like the car was going this way and the truck--. The guy was going this way and the guy that was shooting was going this way. That's the only reason we didn't get shot. The guy on the truck didn't know he was going to get shot. He had a gun too. He shot his intestines out.

ST: Goodness. That must've been really traumatizing for your grandchildren.

DE: We couldn't stay here for a month or two. We knew the guy. They guy used to come here and take my grandkids to the store and take them to the park and stuff. The guy that was shot. We didn't know the guy that had did the shooting. Anyway, he lived. He's living. He's living. He made it. But his intestines--and that was my grandkids. They couldn't believe it. When he fell off the back of the truck across Hawthorne--it was like his mother got there. His mother used to live right down the street. By the time she got there and they pulled him off the pavement. He rolled off the back of the truck. His intestines just fell out. I'm like oh, he got to be dead. He wasn't. He lived. He still living.

ST: Your desire for home ownership is what kept you here during all this.

DE: That's the only reason that I stayed is home ownership to see what it's like to own something. That I can do what I want to do to it. I don't have to worry about my neighbor's car being nowhere to park because in apartments and condos--that was a condo, Honduras were condos at that time. If you don't get home at a certain time you got to park over here because you don't have a specific parking space. I'm telling you it's really murder. I don't see how people live in condos and apartments. That irks me. My daughters, they live



in apartments. When I go down to their house, oh I be so mad because people just park anywhere they want to park. They park in front of y our door like they live here and you live four doors down. Why would you park in front of somebody's house? Give me a break. Just to own something. That is basically why I stayed, to own it. To just see what I could do with it. The lady that I got it from, basically to keep it for her. This is the only one that she could save out of--I think she said she had seven.

ST: And this was Blanch Perry who owned it originally?

DE: Yeah.

ST: And you said she was the first African-American in Belmont.

DE: Yes.

ST: Was there a particular moment or event that really influenced you in becoming sort of a neighborhood activist. You had been working very hard on your own house--when did you begin really working on neighborhood issues?

DE: After the police department raided my house. It really pissed me--excuse the language. It really irritated me because the association people were the people who sent them to my house. I didn't know there was such things as an association. Nobody informed me. Nobody went to the meetings that I knew of. They would always ride past here and they would see me in the yard. I asked them one day. When do you all have meetings and whatever? We have them blah, blah, blah but anybody can't come at that particular time. I'm like okay, whatever. They didn't know me. They used to think it was a bunch of girls live here. It was me and my two daughters. They would always see me in my yard. I would always be in the yard messing with flowers or something in the yard. That just really irritated me when the police raided my house for no reason. Then on top of that they didn't



raid my house. They had this guy's name on a warrant. They were calling him my sons which they know I don't have sons. I have two daughters. They kept saying we want your sons. We want your sons. I'm like I don't have any sons. That really irritated me. I started going to these community meetings with my uniform on. It really--It's like everybody--. It threw a wrench in their mouths or whatever. When I would walk in they would go--. They used to talk about my house all the time in the meeting, so I heard. This was all they talked about was Kennon Street, 1401 Kennon Street. When I would walk in the police officers' mouth would be. Then the ladies--. I used to get a kick out of there just to see what they talking about. Then everybody stopped talking. I'm like, okay you all have a nice day. Then from there I went to--. If you're not going to do anything about the crime, the least we can do--. I formed a crime watch program.

ST: On this street or the neighborhood in general?

DE: The neighborhood. That was in 2000.

ST: How did you go about that? Did you knock on doors?

DE: We had to go through the police departments program they have where you can get the training to start it. They come out and show you how to set up the community watch, tell you what you have to do. We had to go street to street. We had to get eighty percent of signatures. Then we had to have the police officers go with us to knock on these peoples' doors because that was a rule. I think it was to irritate the people that was living in the houses. It really made us stick out like sore thumbs, you know, with the police, walking with the police officer. We got 433 signatures. It took us--. We started in November of '99, I believe, during the holidays and stuff but we finished it up. We started it. We used to have monthly meetings. Our association at that time was running on two people which they never

involved nobody. I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted to know how it functioned. I wanted to know how everything about the neighborhood became how it is. I was really irritated because people living in a neighborhood and it so run down. That's what really irritated me. Why don't y'all do something? Why don't you all do this? Why can't you find something to do? Why can't you make somebody come in and help you clean the neighborhood up? Why do we have to hide behind our doors for gunfire? Why can't we sit on our porches when it get dark? We should be able to do these things. Our kids should be able to play without seeing people getting shot to death and stuff of that nature. The crime watch was a start.

ST: In the process of doing the crime watch you must have talked with a lot of residents.

DE: A lot of people.

ST: Did you get a better sense than you had before of what some of their concerns and needs were?

DE: Yeah. It was--. Well, I still do. They are afraid. A lot of them were afraid because you call the police and they don't come. You call the police and then they come to your house. This was mainly what I was hearing. The police would come and knock on the door and let the drug house right next door--. You call the police on them they go and bang on the drug house and then they come over and talk to you which would actually make the people feel unsafe. It was a lot of concerns. A lot of people really want--had a lot--. We had a lot going on back then. People was coming to the crime watch meeting. Our association wasn't really functioning at that time. Basically we would have crime watch with all these people every month. I would have to come up--. I would have to learn how to actually do it.

I had never done it before. We had a person at neighborhood development named Jennifer Price. She's not there anymore. She left. She basically taught me everything I needed to know as far as doing active work in a neighborhood; how to perform certain duties, how to set up your by-laws. She didn't actually do it. She would refer me to books to read and place where I could go and meet people and talk to them. I started going to community meetings in other neighborhoods and downtown city ( ), city council. After I had to go to city council--. I had to go to city council first of all to get my house off the demolishing order. That was my first time ever hearing about city council, well being at city council. Myself and Mrs. Perry had to go before city council and actually ask for them not to tear our house down. That was my first big speech.

ST: How did you feel about going before them?

DE: I felt like--well, I guess because I work with people. I was still at Charlotte Area Transit. Talking to people everyday, it's just become a natural. Mrs. Perry had butterflies in her stomach and she was just shaking. Well, they can't do nothing but say yes or no, right? Ain't nothing but a group of people and I'm looking at them. During the times that I took my trainings in college I took oral speaking. It teaches you, you always have to make eye contact when you talk to people. I don't know why. I'm good at it because people say, "Oh, you stare at people so hard." It's not that I'm staring. Basically, I can tell what you are about by talking to you. Your expressions on your face. I guess that's being old or whatever. It was a piece of cake for me to talk to them three minutes. [Interruption - phone ringing]

ST: Do you need to get that?

DE: Nah, they'll call on the other one. It's probably my daughters anyway.

ST: We could pause it for just a--. [Pause] I'll continue then. The city council meeting was your first major public speaking event? Is that right?

DE: Yeah. It was one of the biggest one I ever had. I thought it was fun myself. It took me two days to write this speech about this house and why I didn't think you should take this lady's house. It was just not right. I went on for three minutes. Then my three minutes was up. Then she got her three minutes. Then all of sudden they made a decision in a couple of days. "Well, Mrs. English we going to give you an extension." I'm like, "Thank you." It went from there. Then, before I could actually--before I could move into this house or complete the code section of it, city council came to my house. I gave them so much trouble. I called them. I really went all out with them. Any and everything I had a question about I called them. If you got a problem with this then how can I fix it? Where can I go? I think I sort of got on their nerve. Finally, they said, "Ok Mrs. English we going to come and see this house. We got to see this house." They all came with the code enforcement people.

ST: The city council?

DE: Some of the members of city council. Pat Cannon. Patrick Cannon came that day. He was here at that particular time. I forgot the guy's name, he died. Stan--. What's the guy, the plaza building up town they gave this guy? The building uptown, he died at work.

ST: I'm not sure who that would be.

DE: It's a black guy. He used to be on city council. He died at work. He was in the bathroom. I can't think of his name. His brother was on city council at that time. It was just a bunch of them. I don't know the rest of them. They came. They said, "Well, we'll be there at 2:00." I said, "Fine I'll be here." It was on a Friday and I was getting the braids put

in my hair. I had to leave. They came in here and they walked through the house. They said, "Mrs. English, you really did a good job. We still need an engineer." They sent an engineer out here. This engineer to make--. They kept saying the house--. The code people kept saying the house was not steady. It was not sturdy. It was unsafe. I think he's still there now. He's the big guy over code enforcement. What's his name? Trey Jenkins. Last name is Jenkins. He's got this big beard. He rode the bus too. He used to come by here and he would say, "Mrs. English you can't keep this house. This house is going to be demolished. I don't know why you wasting your money on it." I said, "Just because you telling me that it's never going down. You don't ever take anything that Diane English has. I don't give away stuff. You can't take my stuff." It was just a habit I had. If it's mine you not going to take it unless I give it to you. Anyway, this went back and forth and finally this engineer came out one day. He had to go up in the attic. This old man--. First of all he looked at this old tree I had out here that was over a hundred years old. He said, "God that's an old tree." I guess he was an old country man because he was--. He knew a lot of stuff about a lot of stuff from the country, far as I knew. Country about the trees and the flowers, because I had flowers. He was naming the flowers. I'm like god he's been somewhere right. Then he went up in the attic and he came down. I said, "Well what's the verdict? Do they tear my house down or what?" He said, "No, the house is in good shape. I don't know why they keep telling you that." That's when he told me the house was about sixty-five years old at that particular time. He said this house has been here sixty-five years plus. Because of the structure, the guy that lived here, Perry's father that lived here, the way he structured the house after he got the house and redone it. He did the work on it. It's like double braced in every corner. Every part of this house is double braced. It withstood Hugo with no damages.

ST: Really. Wow, that's something.

DE: The guy, the engineer said he hadn't never seen nothing like it before. It's redwood which is your hardest wood, I guess is what it is. He braced it. Every corner has double braces in it. He said you don't find that in your new homes. It's safe as far as I'm concerned. That really upset the code enforcement person.

ST: You think they were wanting to find some reason to--.

DE: They wanted it demolished. They wanted it gone because the police department had said it was a hot spot.

ST: I see.

DE: It was a sore spot. The drug dealers going to hang out here long as the house is here is what they said. Didn't I show them something? It's still on the corner. Every time I see Mr. Jenkins uptown, he'll say, "You still in that old house, right?" "Yep, I'm still in that old house." Talking about god girl. You should have just gave up years ago. I probably should have. Financially, I should have given up, even years ago. It's so expensive to do repair work now. It's very expensive. Then it's like fast as you fix one thing something else is gone. This is wrong with it. That's wrong with it. It's a mess. It's still worth it. I don't know. It's still worth the home ownership.

ST: During these years when you were getting more involved in the neighborhood, do you start to see yourself as an activist?

DE: No. I saw myself as somebody that would speak their mind. I don't call it an activist because if I see and I dislike it I'm going to say something, especially about my neighborhood. It's like people used to--. My friends used to wouldn't come and see me because of my neighborhood. They said, "Oh, god, I can't come there." People at my work



would say, "How do you live in that old gunshot alley neighborhood?" I'm like we going to do something about it. It just takes time. I guess you could say I'm a activist. I just say I'm concerned because this is where I want to be for now, maybe not forever but for this particular minute this is mine. I don't feel like I should have to be run off the street by a bunch of hoodlums or a bunch of people who want to walk downtown that should've been already here and help keep the neighborhood up to par. It was a nice neighborhood back in the '60s. It was real nice. Then your white people move out. Then it goes to the dogs. Then all of sudden, oh, I want to live up there and I want to walk downtown. Come on now. Give me a break. It's not fair. They moved the blacks out of the city at one time. Moved us out to the suburbs. That was back in the '70s I believe.

ST: Are you talking about the Urban Renewal?

DE: Yeah. They moved everybody out that way. That's when I went out to Pine Valley. Then all of a sudden they let us come back into the city. Now they're telling us, "Oh we want these houses." It's like every neighborhood surrounding the downtown area has been either targeted or revitalizing. What do they call it? Gentrification. It's exactly what it is. Gentrification. We know it. We been knowing it for years. It hasn't been that obvious. Now, it's very obvious.

ST: What do you fear is going to be lost if the gentrification process continues here in Belmont?

DE: The neighborhood itself, the history of the neighborhood. The houses because everything is going to condominiums. I don't think too many people care about the homes anymore. Everybody wants to be where they don't have to do anything, just pay your rent, pay your bills. Let somebody else do the work for you. I think a lot of people are lazy.



They don't want flowers. They don't want to have a space of their own. Then you have a lot of single people that live by themselves. Maybe they are afraid to live in a house. I don't know. I feel like eventually they will lose--. A lot of these homes will be destroyed simply because they want condos. They have the funds, the means to do that. I feel like they are very sneaky with it. We went through a year or two years to get a Belmont plan in place. Now you virtually don't hear anything about it. It's always the Hope VI Plan and like what happened to the Belmont plan? Everything was altered.

ST: When you refer to the Belmont plan are you referring to that 2003 report that came out? The Belmont Revitalization plan the city had for the neighborhood?

DE: Yes. May 12, 2003.

ST: You were a part of that.

DE: Yeah, we were the--what do they call it--the stake holders. The six stake holders that never missed a meeting for almost two years to get the plan together as they said. Then all of a sudden there was a lot of changes that we weren't aware of. It took us about a year to get the new, original books. The new--what do they call them--books. We had the original plan book. Then they edit it, some of the material. We never got that one. I think we got that one last year, the year before, last year.

ST: You felt like the city was making changes the residents didn't want.

DE: They made changes that we weren't aware of. Their excuse for that was we had to do it and we had to do it in X amount of time. We didn't have time to come back to you all.

ST: Give me an example of a change that you weren't in favor of.

DE: The Hope VI. Everything about the Hope VI was--. In fact we were doing the Belmont plan when they were trying to do a Hope VI plan at that particular time. It was like it was a split thing. Charlotte Housing Authority was working on the Piedmont Court people. We used to go there and try to get them into the neighborhood to be a part of the neighborhood meetings. They would always say the Housing Authority is starting us up a community organization. The Housing Authority it doing this for us and blah, blah, blah. IT was like they would be going to the Hope VI. We would be going to the Belmont plant. This was going on simultaneously at the same time.

ST: This will be a good moment for me to ask you a little bit more about Piedmont Courts. When you first moved here how much contact did you have with residents over in Piedmont Courts?

DE: We used to give them flyers every month. We used to give flyers and crime watch. When I started the crime watch we used to take the flyers in there because a lot of the people--. Oh, the neighborhood people loved the crime watch newsletter because we'd put in there who got caught for what. The first thing they would say, "Oh, I told you I know him. He's been doing drugs." This went on. We were actually get the report from the police department and put it in the newsletter. The people loved it. They thought that was the best thing. "When you all going to do another one of those newsletters?" We used to go down there and talk to them and try to see if we could get them to combine. We felt like they felt like they were separate. It's always been like Piedmont Courts. I'm like, is Piedmont Courts not in Belmont? It always made you feel like it was just Piedmont Courts and then you got Belmont. The same way they got this Hope VI thing now. It feels like there is no Belmont. It's just Hope VI and Piedmont Courts. That's all you hear. Hope VI and Piedmont Courts.

Piedmont Courts is a part of Belmont. It's simple. Get over it. Why don't you all include it in the Belmont--? They changing the names of everything. It's like Charlotte Housing Authority has taken over the neighborhood. Basically, to do whatever they see fit and whenever they decide.

ST: In working with the folks and getting to know some of the folks who lived over in Piedmont Courts, what sorts of concerns and needs did they discuss with you and were those different from those you heard from people in Belmont outside of Piedmont Courts?

DE: The people that living in Piedmont Courts, they were--. A lot of them didn't have high school diplomas and they was just trying to go back to school to get high school diplomas. They were trying to get job trainings. They were told that they could get job trainings and high school diploma and that would make them ready to relocate back into some of the apartments once the apartments are ready.

ST: For the Hope VI you mean?

DE: For something. At that time it wasn't nothing. It was just--.

ST: Even before the Hope Six.

DE: They tried it two years before. I think they failed at the grant that they did two years before. The grant that they had previously applied for they didn't get. Then they retried again in 2003. This one, it took them almost a year to get right. I think they had a lot of help from the city.

ST: What was Piedmont Courts like in general? Just describe to me--.

DE: Gunshot alley. It was terrible. People shooting, killing. Drugs. Kids running wild. It was awful, almost like--. It was the exact same thing as the neighborhood but it was

like it was condensed because it was apartments. It was just like this big old neighborhood. Gunshot alley. It was just condensed. It was more condensed because everybody lived within the Piedmont Courts.

ST: So, what would you say to someone then who said, "Well, if there is so much violence then it should be torn down."

DE: To me, that's not a reason to tear down apartments because you got violence, because you got crime. To me, that was a poor excuse for the city and Charlotte Housing Authority to tear down to remodel for condos. That's what I feel. I don't think it's got anything to do with the crime. Then Piedmont Courts had been remodeled a couple of years ago. They started remodeling Piedmont Courts.

ST: Oh really?

DE: I had a friend that lived in one of them that had been remodeled.

ST: What do you think of it?

DE: It was nice because it went in, they insulated it. She had the sheet rock walls not the brick walls. She had new walls. They redone the banisters, windowsills. It was really nice.

ST: They are doing this just a couple of years before it's going to be torn down?

DE: Well, yeah, before I even heard anything about a Hope Six. She was living in one of them. Then all of a sudden you start saying, well they dilapidated. They just didn't take care of them.

ST: What do you wish the city had done with Piedmont Courts?

DE: To me, they should have gutted them and remodeled them and left them as is. The city doesn't own them. The Housing Authority owns them so they say. Charlotte

Housing Authority they are doing it all over the city. I think they want to get away from public housing which they say they got new ones that they've already put up like Oaklawn on the Park and Arbor Glen. They are real pretty. They are real pretty, pretty, pretty. There are still project people living there. It's not obvious. It just makes it--. I think what they do it they single out a lot of people. There's no way a lot of people can make the income to go back into those apartments. We question what is the income limit. Well, it's a sliding scale, blah, blah, blah, which it is. If they got to compete with just ordinary people they don't have--some of the didn't have high school diplomas. They didn't have job experiences. What make you think they are going to come back and qualify? If they had police, the police mainly visited every apartment there once upon a time. If you got a police record what makes you think they going to qualify to come back. I think they targeted Piedmont Courts because you got an old Fourth Ward up here. I mean, god, you got them old big fancy condos stuck out back there and you look back there and you see old raggedy, gun down, Piedmont Courts. Then you come on up and see the old raggedy, dilapidated houses in Belmont. Naturally, Piedmont Courts had to be the first. They had to go. They had talked about putting a buffer there when we was doing our plan. Put a buffer between--what is that?--Piedmont Courts. Well the freeway, 77, 277 they wanted to put a buffer there.

ST: Like a barrier of some sort?

DE: They said trees, a line of trees for a buffer. A buffer for the noise. We knew it was to hide Piedmont Courts really is what it was for. They didn't want people riding past and see the projects.

ST: To hide it from view.

DE: Yeah. Because these people down here in Fourth Ward, they looking out their back door. What are they looking at--Piedmont Courts, right? I think that's what it mainly amounted to which is sad.

ST: What do you think the demolition of Piedmont Courts and the building of this new Hope VI project is ultimately going to mean for the Belmont neighborhood?

DE: It's going to mean you got high price condos. That's about it. Really, it's like it always has been. It's going to be Piedmont Courts, Belmont. It's singled out. It's not like they are doing things to the whole neighborhood. It's mainly Siegle Avenue, Piedmont Courts, Siegle Avenue. Only the things that are being worked on at this time are the Hope VI things. That's on Siegle Avenue. Everything else has been dropped. We are working on that. We are doing a wet contract. We are doing a dry contract. We going to do this, but nothing's ever been done.

ST: You think all the attention's going to be--?

DE: Focused on Hope VI.

ST: I see. The rest of the neighborhood will get kind of neglected.

DE: Yeah, until--. I think what is happening is everything is on hold until they see how many of us they can get rid of. It'll make it much easier for them to move in for the kill as I say, to take over. It's not as easy when you are messing with homeowners and as it is when you got renters. Like the apartment people, like Piedmont Courts. It's different when you come out here and you got home owners, especially when you got a mouth like Diane English running things around the neighborhood. It's very hard to just come in here and do anything you want to do. I hate the thought that they are putting those condos down there. Then we heard last night at a meeting, they are wanting to put condos on Davidson Street

which is over in Optimist Park. We got a person just interested in putting in condos on Van Every which is right up the street from old Piedmont Courts. I'm like, come on. Why would the want to put condos in the midst--. Then they said no, they look more like row houses. Why would you want to put that in a neighborhood? I said god after a while we going to have them coming from everywhere talking about these little needle in a haystack condominiums sites. They just popping up everywhere. Everybody wants to put a condo now. It's been said that this whole area would be condominiums. I call it stacking, warehousing people is what it is. It's stacking more people on top of people to get them closer to downtown. They'll do anything to be near downtown for some reason. I don't even like downtown. I be downtown. I never go down there when I'm off. I can't stand downtown. Then it's nicer than what it used to be downtown. It's a big change than what it used to be. It's alive downtown. Basically, if this house had been set fifty miles from here it probably would have been the same for me. It's not the neighborhood per se being Belmont. It's just the home ownership.

ST: I realize we are getting a little close on time so I'm going to pause this for a minute.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Karen Meier, September, 2006